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GETTING THE MOST OUT OF WHAT YOU HAVE

The balance between online web site usability and providing content

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide basic and practical suggestions for obtaining a balance between online web site ease of use and comprehensive online content.

Design/methodology/approach – The approach is to show how library administrators can prepare for achieving a balance of providing the online content users need, while still striving to make their library web site user-friendly.

Findings – Librarians may find that they need to change their mind-set of web site design having comprehensive information and instead focus on a streamlined, clean-looking web site that gets their patrons to their resources as fast as possible, especially in lieu of mobile devices which are becoming so popular. Librarians may also need to change their personal approach towards vendors, patrons, as well as their own staff.

Originality/value – The value of this paper is in its list of practical and interpersonal suggestions for obtaining a balance of web site usability and comprehensive online content, and relaying that intention towards a library's constituencies.

Keywords Web sites, Online operation

Paper type Conceptual paper

With a troubled economy now negatively affecting many library budgets, library administrators will likely begin (if they have not already started) walking high-wire acts of paring budgets down to suggested-cut levels while at the same time trying to not cut resources enough to hamper their patrons' research. Just about everyone is feeling the crunch, and students and faculty are no exception. Students who have had their tuition increased and faculty who have had salaries frozen or even reduced may not be sympathetic to librarians when they see their sacrifices equate to even fewer research resources than before, or having to navigate through a library web site they feel is hard to use.

One way to make the user experience easier has been to consolidate as many journal packages and databases through as few a number of vendors as possible, or, as an alternative, to subscribe to a federated search solution. But in this economy, librarians may find it difficult to simply afford subscriptions they already have. It is not always possible to get all the databases and journals you need from one specific provider or even two to three providers. In other words, libraries may need to choose, if they have not already, between content and interfaces, between providing as many resources as



possible or providing fewer resources, but with an easier usability experience for our patrons. It is not always possible to do both.

There are many factors one has to consider when walking this balancing act. Budgets, the kind of library you are in, the quality of IT support you have, and the flexibility of your reference and instructional librarians, are all just some parts of the overall equation. For example, if you have the library personnel to be able to effectively teach multiple interfaces, adapt to numerous new database quirks, and make library web site modifications themselves, you will have the luxury of more options to address the demands placed on your library. But no matter what, however, patrons' needs are a very important factor. If you can get a database cheaply, from a provider you already get others from, but it is not one your patrons want, need, or will use, that does not do anybody any good in the long run. Even for those of us in academic libraries, getting databases that would seem subject-appropriate for our patrons, but ones that do not actually have the journals they need, can be detrimental in the long run. Eventually patrons will not use them and usage statistics will dwindle.

The library I work in has a very small staff, and we try to keep our web site user-friendly, while always trying to increase the number of resources we have, as best as we can. And we must always consider scalability of any new projects or improvements as well. I can say, from my experience however, that the following basic considerations should help strike a balance between usability and content:

- If you do not have the funds to have a more user-friendly Web 2.0-type of online library web site created, then consider the notion of making your web site look very clean, very efficient, and built for speed. Large graphics can slow page loading, especially if your patrons are using mobile networks, or even dial-up in rural areas, to access the web site. Consider server-side programming to make it run faster, and implementing clean, strategically placed graphics. There are free web site authoring tools more readily available now than in the past, such as Word Press or Google Sites. Be aware though, that they do not always give you the options you would have when creating or tuning up the library web site on your own using web developer tools. And always check with your IT department before going that route, if you can. They may be able to give you tips and hints on how to proceed. Just remember though, people typically appreciate getting to where they need to go, if it is done quickly and efficiently, especially when using mobile devices. Meaning, if accessing journals, or finding community information, for example, can be done quickly and efficiently, users will often not mind if a site does not have the prettiest graphics or overall designer look.
- Try to know, as best as you can, what content your users need. If you are in an academic library, for example, consult with a library advisory committee, composed of constituent representatives. But also ask faculty, whenever you can, about what they need. And the same goes with students. I have found that if I ask folks what they want, their answers tend to be very open-ended and not always constructive. But more often than not, if I ask what they need, then I get more specific requests for books or journals, and that is easier to work on obtaining. But no matter what library you are in, it is a good idea to talk to your users to find out what they need. Be prepared to listen and be prepared to be surprised. You may find out that what you thought was wanted is not what is needed.

- If your library can, join a consortium or try to partner with other libraries in order to afford ways to obtain content, whether that is for subscriptions, interlibrary loans, or document delivery options. Strength in numbers goes far these days.
- Create and sustain personal, working relationships with your database and publisher vendor reps. In these economic times, everyone is feeling nervous. There is no need to feel that vendors are preying upon you. Even when you cannot afford a subscription or product, let your reps know that, but also let them know you are still interested in their product. They may be willing to help you out with pricing, because it also helps them out too. Have a “we’re all in this together” approach because that is often really the case.
- Be prepared to work even harder with reference and instruction duties. A streamlined and fast web site that allows you to rapidly choose databases, without pushing you to use a federated technology, or funneling you through subject guides right away, can appear unintuitive to some users. For them, it is like a manual-transmission motorcycle that does not appear as comfortable as an automatic sedan. But strategically-accessible print, video, audio, and in-person instruction on what your library has online, and how to use it, will help displace the fears. It can take time to provide systematic instruction via different mediums, but it can be scalable. For example, make comprehensive print instructions more about how the library web site operates overall, because that typically will not radically change over short periods of time. But, for example, when providing instruction for database interfaces (which often change), create short two- to three-minute videos using Jing, Camtasia, or other similar tools. Those can be re-done much more easily when interfaces change.
- Have a mindset that you can only do “so much” when it comes to your budget. Let’s face it, our budgets will never be what we want them to be. Just like in our personal lives, our budgets are influenced by so many various outside influences that it is impossible to account for them all. But, like with personal budgets, keep them very well documented, spend them wisely on necessary resources first before spending them on optional resources, and try to supplement them as best as you can with your own secondary efforts, such as through grants and/or donations.
- And last, but certainly not least, be transparent to your patrons and to your staff about your decisions, and be honest. There is nothing wrong with explaining why your library cannot afford something, why your web site is the way it is, why you chose one database over another, and whether it was due to cost or because it better serves a greater portion of your patrons, etc. Most reasonable people will understand the difficulty in making such choices. And while some may still disagree with your decisions, they likely will appreciate, or perhaps just simply acknowledge, that you explained your reasoning to them. Most patrons and staff like to be heard and treated with respect. Being transparent and honest about your decision-making processes will help with that.

I know that as a librarian, I often feel that helping a patron find something will either end in success or the opposite, i.e. did I get them what they needed or not. But when it

comes to the balance of making a library web site as user-friendly as possible while still providing as much content as possible, there is not always such a clear-cut distinction. It is not a situation in which we can please everyone, and not a situation in which success is easily determined. Instead, just aim for the best balance you can, and when troubled, reach out for help. We are all facing this predicament, after all.

About the author

Alain Dussert is a native Southern Californian who graduated with a BA in Comparative Literature from the University of California at Santa Cruz in 1995. He acquired an MA in Classics from Johns Hopkins University in 1999 before attending library school at UCLA. After acquiring his MLIS from UCLA in 2001, he briefly worked for the UCLA libraries until becoming the Distributed Education Services Librarian at Fielding Graduate University, in Santa Barbara, California, in late 2001. In 2007, he became Fielding's Director of Library Services, where he currently holds that position. His main professional interests include digital repositories, collection development, outreach services, and reference and instruction. Alain Dussert can be contacted at: adussert@fielding.edu